ACTION LEARNING – THE CORNERSTONE FOR BUILDING A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Perhaps no tool is more effective in building a learning organization than action learning Lex Dilworth (1995) called action learning "the DNA of a learning organization" since action learning enables organizations to continuously learn on an organization-wide basis, thereby being better able to adapt to the continuously changing environment. Reg Revans (1982), a pioneer in the development of action learning, notes that action learning creates "constant learning opportunities for people. It inherently creates a culture and morale for learning." Today, hundreds of organizations around the world are utilizing action learning as the key driver in bringing in the culture and the principles necessary to become a learning organization. For example, Fraser and Neave, a global company headquartered in Singapore, has made action learning the cornerstone in building continuous Innovation through Action Learning (iTAL). Other organizations such as Humana, Goodrich, Microsoft, and Samsung have discovered that the most effective way of dramatically increasing system wide learning is to establish numerous action learning projects throughout the organization.

The Action Learning Group – A Mini-model of the Learning Organization

Peter Senge, recognized as Mr. Learning Organization by many people around the world for his classic *The Fifth Discipline,* indicated that, in order for a company to become a learning organization, it needed to be able to integrate work with learning on a daily basis, to have a culture of continuously reflecting and learning.

Action learning provides precisely that experience and creates the mindset that learning and action are interchangeable, and that one can learn from every action, and that learning only become real learning when it results in improved actions. The action learning group is a mini-learning organization in which all five subsystems of the learning organization are incorporated and integrated. Action learning groups develops the mindset and the skills that enable the members to become continuous learners and generate continuous learning throughout the organization.

How Action Learning Contributes to Building a Learning Organization

Each of these six components described above contribute to the building of a learning organization as each or all of these components:

- are designed to systematically transfer knowledge throughout the organization
- enable people to learn by doing
- help develop learning how to learn skills

- encourage continual learning
- create a learning culture where learning becomes a way of life
- use an active rather than a passive approach
- are applied on the job rather than off the job
- allow for mistakes and experimentation
- develop skills of critical reflection and reframing
- serve as a mechanism for developing learning skills and behavior
- demonstrate the benefits of organizational learning
- model working and learning simultaneously
- are problem-focused rather than hierarchically bound
- provide networks for sharing, supporting, giving feedback and challenging assumptions
- develop the ability to generate information
- break down barriers between people and across traditional organizational boundaries
- help the organization move from a culture of training (in which someone else determines and provides your development) to a culture of learning (in which everyone is responsible for their own continuous learning)
- are systems-based
- apply learnings to other parts of the organization as appropriate

A Learning Organization has five subsystems – learning, organization, people, knowledge and technology. Let's now explore how action learning builds each of the five learning subsystems.

How Action Learning Builds the Learning Subsystem

Learning is the core subsystem of the learning organization. The learning subsystem refers to levels and types of learning that are crucial for organizational learning and the relevant organizational skills. Learning occurs at the individual, group, and organizational levels; and there are anticipatory and adaptive types of learning. The learning skills of systems thinking, mental models, personal mastery, self-directed learning, and dialogue are also a part of this subsystem.

Action learning programs encourage and enable significant learning at all three levels of learning. Action learning programs strive for and develop the other two types of learning, adaptive and anticipatory (see chapter 3). Adaptive learning occurs when, in reflecting on past actions, the group attempts to develop a new action that represents a better response to the environment. Through its analysis of a variety of possible future scenarios or probable effects of different actions, the group acquires anticipatory learning skills. Action learning sets generate innovative, creative
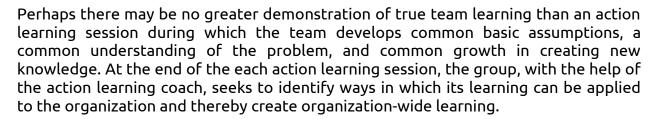
knowledge, and the time allowed for deep and frequent reflection provides the avenue for single-loop, double-loop, and even deutero learning. Action learning gives people in the organization the opportunity to build each of these learning disciplines.

Action learning also encourages and develops dialogue. Dilworth (1998) notes that action learning promotes a depth and intensity of dialogue that is uncommon in the normal life experience. Inherent in this approach is the ability to acknowledge that we frequently act in ways that may be incongruent with the values and opinions we espouse. Revans (1982) observed that it is the "social dimension of action learning that provides the challenge to misconceptions and ingrained mental schemata which predispose a person to overlook the ways in which he/she needs to change." In action learning, real problems are explored in a non-defensive ways with colleagues who support, question, and advise.

Alan Mumford (1995) has identified ten valuable learning behaviors, all of which can be developed within action learning programs:

1. Asking questions
2. Offering suggestions
3. Exploring options
4. Taking risks and experimenting
5. Being open and up front
6. Converting mistakes into learning
7. Reflecting and reviewing
8. Talking about learning
9. Taking responsibility for our own learning and development
10. Admitting to inadequacies and mistakes

Perhaps there may be no greater demonstration of true team learning than an action learning session during which the team develops common basic assumptions, a common understanding of the problem, and common growth in creating new knowledge. At the end of the each action learning session, the group, with the help of the action learning coach, seeks to identify ways in which its learning can be applied to the organization and thereby create organization-wide learning.

How Action Learning Builds the Organization Subsystem

The second subsystem of a learning organization is the organization itself, the setting and body in which the learning itself occurs. The four key dimensions or components of this subsystem are vision, culture, strategy, and structure

The culture created in action learning programs is one where learning is the most important and valuable objective. Throughout the action learning process there is an emphasis on how the group can continue to expand upon and speed up their knowledge and learning capacities. Members are encouraged and expected to take risks and try new

ways. They recognize that much of the greatest leaps in learning have come from learning from mistakes made. The culture in an action learning group is one in which learning is expected, rewarded, encouraged and continuous, and one in which the learning is valued as much as action.

Garratt (1991) remarks how action learning is particularly valuable in helping organizations develop a vision committed to continuous learning. Schein (1993), a pioneer in understanding organizational culture and organizational change, notes that "for change (learning) to occur, the organization must unlearn previous beliefs, be open to new inputs and relearn new assumptions and behaviors." Action learning is a powerful tool in helping to change these values and create these new visions.

Action learning organizations have a natural and powerful bias for reflection-in-action. The capacity to quickly take action and to generate information is critical to organizations. Senge (1990) observes that "learning cannot exist apart from action. Action provides a basis for the critical dimension of reflection." It is the expressed strategy of an action learning program to build in time, space and opportunities for learning. And no strategy is more powerful for producing organization-wide learning than getting large numbers of employees involved in action learning programs.

The structure of an action learning set is very fluid and flexible. Hierarchy and protocol is minimized. Allowing the flow of questions and interactions to be concise and clear is critical in processes such as reframing the problem, identifying possible actions, and providing frank feedback to one another. Needless protocol and bureaucracy and administrivia are discouraged and leadership is distributed throughout the group.

How Action Learning Builds the People Subsystem

The people subsystem of the learning organization involves learning by the employees, managers/leaders, customers, and business partners (suppliers, vendors, and sub-contractors) of the organization, as well as by the communities in which the organization operates. Each of these groups is a part of the learning chain, and all need to be empowered and enabled to learn.

Action learning recognizes the importance of involving people from throughout the business chain in the problem-solving process. Action learning groups can become very effective if they are diverse, and incorporate not only different hierarchical levels of the organization, but also bring in customers, suppliers, and interested community members to ask fresh questions and share fresh perspectives. Building learning alliances help organizations to achieve continuous improvement and develop the capacity to cope with discontinuous change. Learning from fresh faces is critical for success in action learning as it is in organizations. New partner and perspectives can:

- enlarge the range of the continuous environmental scanning ability of those in the alliance
- bring a wide analytical range, and a wider range of assumptions to the learning process, so that discontinuities are more likely to be recognized
- help members recognize and overcome defensive routines so that they can be more transcendent.
- take place at multiple levels within the alliance, and improve the learning of all members
- open up the boundaries of the organization, and make possible completely new organizational forms, constantly open to importing chaos and evolving new forms of order

Empowering people to take responsibility for themselves rather than waiting for outside expertise is a key value of action learning. Limerick et al. (1994) point out that there is within action learning programs "the explicit recognition that management's role is to provide continuous opportunities for employees' self-development."

In learning organizations, a primary task of managers is to facilitate the staff's learning from experience. Through their experiences in action learning programs, managers recognize the importance of making time for seeking feedback, for obtaining data from a variety of perspectives, for encouraging new actions for old and new problems. They will also perceive the value in questioning their own ideas, basic assumptions, attitudes and actions.

How Action Learning Builds the Knowledge Subsystem

The knowledge subsystem of a learning organization refers to the management of acquired and generated knowledge of the organization. It includes the (1) acquisition, (2) creation, (3) storage, (4) analysis and data mining, (5) transfer and dissemination, and (6) application and validation of knowledge. The implementation of action learning programs within organizations contains effective mechanisms for incorporating all six aspects of the knowledge subsystem.

Acquiring Knowledge: In action learning programs, group members are advised of the importance of acquiring knowledge not only from external resources but also the value of tapping the tacit, internal wisdom and experience of each other within the group as well as other parts of the organization. The internal networks developed in action learning groups heighten the awareness of organizational resources, facilitate exchanging and sharing of ideas, and generate tremendous amounts of valuable knowledge.

Creating Knowledge: Participants in action learning programs realize the importance of constantly creating new knowledge, of being innovative so that they can discover new and break through ways of solving the problems of the organization. Current or existing

knowledge is rarely sufficient to solve complex challenges. Thus, members are constantly creating new knowledge and to encourage innovation within the set. Nonaka (1994) suggests that information creation is a fundamental requirement for the self-renewing (i.e., learning) organization. Creativity and innovation is natural in problem-solving groups that are diverse and continuously questioning each other for new knowledge and ideas.

Storing Knowledge: Knowing what knowledge to store and how to store it is based upon the organization's ability to make sense of the data encompassing and surrounding it. The company must then develop sense-making categories for coding and retaining value-added knowledge. Through its ongoing reflection on learning and the knowledge acquired, action learning programs lends themselves well to the Kantian school of thinking which "positions sense-making above mere sensing" (Botham and Vick, 1998). By reflecting on action, the action learning group develops the ability to "make meaning" of the data collected and stored.

Analysis and data mining: During the action learning sessions, group members regularly analyze the knowledge that has been acquired and created, synthesize it, and determine if it can be utilized in solving the problem given to them. Between sessions, the information that has been stored may be examined to seek ways it can be of benefit to the action learning project.

Transferring and dissemination: At the conclusion of each action learning session, group members are asked to identify what knowledge that has been gained during that session what would be of value to the organization. Members determine who should receive this information and/or what knowledge management system should receive this knowledge. Of course, group members capture and store for themselves the knowledge and wisdom that will help them become better in both their professional and personal lives.

Application and validation: Between action learning sessions, action learning members are testing out the strategies that they have developed to test whether their ideas are valid and applicable. Action learning, as noted earlier, is built on the belief that only learning which is applicable is truly learning, and that all true learning can and should lead to powerful actions. At the final session of the action learning program, a number of strategies and actions are proposed to the organization, and are applied by the group members and/or other members of the organization. During and following the implementation of the strategies, the action learning group reflects on what has worked and what has not, and why.

How Action Learning Builds the Technology Subsystem

Action learning has the power to energize and augment both components of the technology subsystem: enhancing learning and managing knowledge. Technology

alone will not enable an organization to take advantage of the new strategic opportunities to increase its learning and utilize its knowledge. Individuals and especially teams are needed to optimize the development and application of technology. Developing the best e-learning hardware and software requires a keen understanding of how individuals and groups learn; how they can access, transfer, and apply knowledge; and how their learning and knowledge can lead to corporate success.

Action learning groups, when appropriate, examine the possible technologies that might be used in the project and how technology can manage the knowledge and learning of the group and of the organization. If the solution involves learning and/or knowledge management, the group examines how learning or management technologies might increase the power and speed of the strategy implementation.

Technology and action learning also interact in other ways. Action learning teams can examine how and why knowledge is or is not flowing throughout the organization. Electronic Performance Support Systems can be designed and applied more fruitfully when developed by action learning groups. And technology plays an important role when action learning groups must meet virtually, a situation that is occurring with increasing frequency and proving to be very successful.

The Power of Action Learning in Building a Learning Organization

As described by theories and demonstrated by case examples, action learning can quickly and successfully contribute to the building of a learning organization. Since it is both action-oriented and learning-focused, it serves as a perfect model and practice arena for organizational learning. By its very nature, action learning enables people to learn by doing, mostly on the job, thereby modeling simultaneous working and learning. It promotes a culture of continual learning that encourages experimentation and allows for mistakes within networks where people feel free to share knowledge, offer support and feedback, and challenge assumptions.

Two significant events occur within action learning groups that help to create learning organizations. First, team members resolve problems, transfer the ideas and strategies throughout the organization, and constantly acquire relevant information and knowledge that will be valuable for future problem-solving episodes. Second, the body of institutional knowledge increases and the pace of institutional learning accelerates as more and more action learning groups proliferate in the organization.

Its systems-based design facilitates the transfer and application of knowledge throughout the organization, breaking down barriers between people and across traditional organizational boundaries. All these qualities help move an organization away from a culture of training, in which someone else determines and provides for

our development, and toward a culture of learning, in which we are responsible for our own learning.

With this approach, action learning member spend time reflecting on actions planned and then identifying their learning, whether it is derived from successes or failures, or is of a technical or process in nature. An action learning program might begin in one area or department and later filter throughout the company, thus serving as a catalyst for change and learning across the entire organization. Action learning programs are so effective in building learning organizations because they begin and end where innovative strategies are needed and significant learning is required.

Dr. Michael Marquardt

President WIAL

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